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"GHOST DANCE"
By Ralph Blakelock

—Courtesy C. P. Pinckard, Chicago

The Art of Blakelock

By JAMES WILLIAM PATTISON

BEAUTIFUL color never loses its charm. The student at the academy is told that graceful and correct drawing, in his paintings, are the first essentials to success. But I am disposed to say, "Whatever may be the shortcomings in your paintings, try to secure pleasing color." The world can, and does, forget talented composers, but pleasing color never dies. Years may pass and no one give heed, but there surely will come a day of resurrection and a renewal of enthusiasm, on the part of the public, as the charming color again appeals to men's hearts. Intellectual art may be buried forever, but colorful, sentimental art throws off its grave clothes sooner or later.

Some forty odd paintings by Ralph Blakelock, the colorist, have come into the art market, being purchased by Moulton & Ricketts from a collector who bought them direct from Mrs. Blakelock just after her husband was compelled to cease painting.

Thirty years ago, Blakelock's pictures

found acceptance at the exhibitions, and appeared in the show windows of art dealers of New York City. One day this genius laid down his paints and entered the door of an asylum. We suppose that he is still there, to endure his weary life to its end, but none of us knows very exactly about it. There are a wife and some children lost in the wilds of New York City, but former friends hear but little about them. Blakelock always commanded the attention of a little company of enthusiasts, people of much sentiment but of only limited financial ability. Sympathy butters no bread, though it may help the crust-eater to endure his dry diet. What an artist must have, in order to be comfortable, is several hundred admirers, who regularly order pictures to constantly supply him with a sufficiency of funds. In fact, there must be created a fashion for this particular man's paintings, or else he will be cramped for money.

Blakelock's experience differed in no way



"INDIAN ENCAMPMENT"
By Ralph Blakelock

—Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

from that of every original genius. It is dangerous to be original, people fear to embrace a genius, although a few knowing ones may enthusiastically appreciate his worth. When, finally, the hesitating buyers are convinced that the art is really of a high order, they all rush in to buy. In the meantime the supply of pictures becomes limited, when the fine mind, which created them, lies dormant.

Fortunately America is growing a generation of picture lovers who have for their guide their own cultivated instincts and who are now admirers of Blakelock's art, for the sake of the wonderful color tones in it.

In these writings, it has been said that superior color is often attained at the expense of good drawing, and that sentiment is very liable to interfere with exact statement of facts. Good poetry is charged with a few details; these sufficiently well expressed to be understandable, but not over insisted upon. Coleridge writes in this fashion:

"There is not wind enough to twirl
The one red leaf the last of its clan,
That dances as often as dance it can,
Hanging so light, hanging so high
On the topmost twig that looks up at the
sky."

This is certainly descriptive, and has enough detail to make plain the story, but

more than this, it is intensely suggestive; the silence of the night, the vague light from a veiled moon, revealing and concealing, appealing to our love of silence, a few words full of meaning.

In many of Blakelock's pictures there is much less detail than in this bit of poetry, but one feels vigorously that sentiment and color are the chief elements which he uses. Possibly were his facts more specific his poetical color would be lost. The clothing of his thought is not abundant and very often not cut in fashionable style.

For many centuries, artists felt obliged to draw with grace and accuracy. No picture could be accepted for exhibition unless its materials were smoothly wrought and learnedly drawn. But Blakelock, and certain others, revolted against this slavery. To secure the sentiment moving his heart, he abandoned everything else. Rigidly correct forms upset him. The moment he stopped feeling, and gave himself up to thinking, his genius fled. He was of a re-

finéd nature, easily upset, must let himself be entirely ruled by his color sense, or a loss of charm ensued.

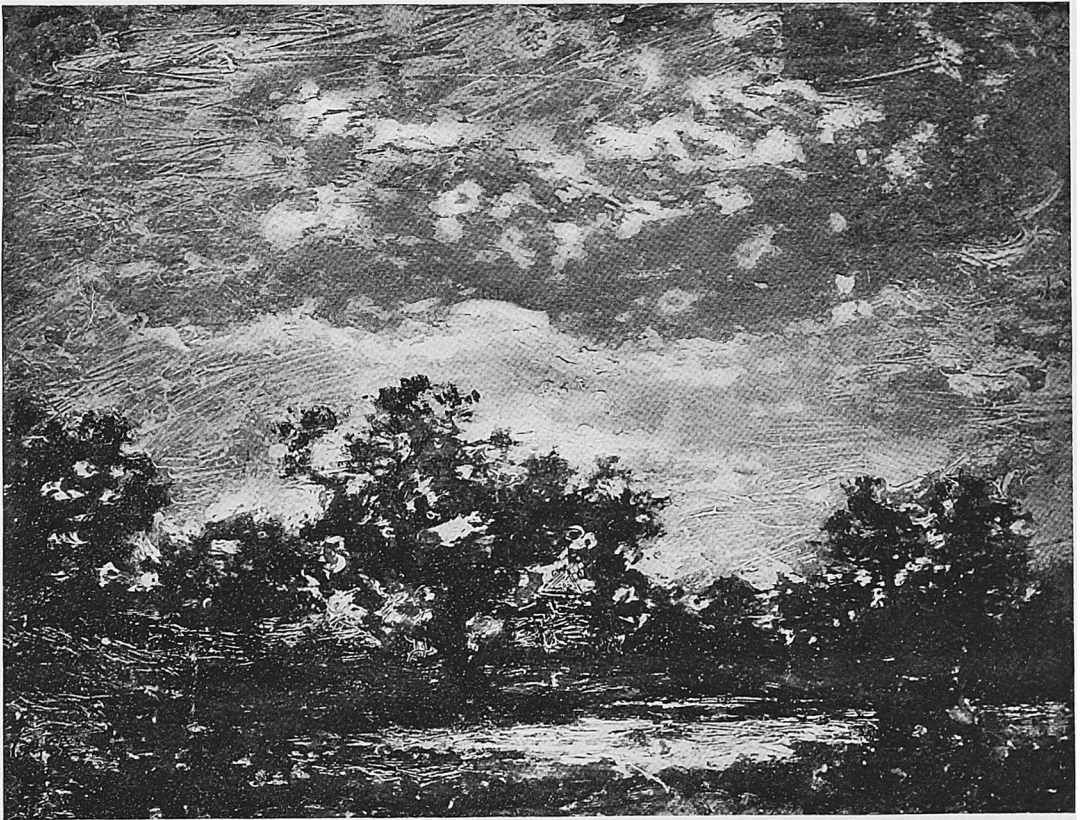
A few words of life history will aid us in understanding the situation. He saw the light in New York City, 1847. His father, a physician, brought up the boy to follow his own profession. But this did not count, as physics were distasteful, and he doubted his ability to make a success as a practitioner. The young man's heart was touched by music and art. But his limited means forbade the systematic study of either. Perhaps it was accidental, but a little journey to the west, at the time when Indians were still plentiful, seemed to determine his course. He sketched the Aborigines, and the landscapes in which he found them.

Though disinclined to draw the human figure according to classical rules, the life of this western country always claimed attention. Of course, his figures were merely suggestions, but they served their purpose



"PIPE DANCE"
By Ralph Blakelock

—Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



"MOONLIGHT"
By Ralph Blakelock

—Courtesy Moulton & Ricketts Galleries

by making an excuse for painting pictures.

It is a fact that a correctly detailed figure, introduced in a freely painted landscape is a total mistake. When the careful painter, Meissonnier, placed a perfect figure in a landscape, he either rendered his outdoors in a hard dry manner, or else merely suggested it enough to tell his story. His figure had to be perfect. His landscape was bad. A host of painters followed, more or less, his style, painting beautiful figures and equally beautiful landscapes for them to live in. But the figures never did, or could, live in the landscapes. Five feet away the figures were beautiful and the landscape a confusion. Twenty feet away the figure was nothing and the landscape wonderful. They never belonged together. When certain men insisted upon giving to figure and landscape the

same touch and atmosphere, so that they were one, many picture buyers revolted. But let us be thankful we have gotten over that bad fashion. Blakelock's genius revolted at this old tradition. The suggestion of a figure might interest him, and his admirers, but there must be no more than a suggestion, just as his landscape was only a suggestion, and all must be colorful, poetical and suggestive. Nothing positive or detailed could possibly enter his work.

It was much the same with Inness, who depended upon human figures and cattle to add spottings of color and threads of sparkle to his weaving of trees and hills. No one seems to feel offended at the lack of perfect drawing in either of these artist's pictures, so poetical are they. Many critics have compared these two painters. Each was moved by the same impulse, bas-

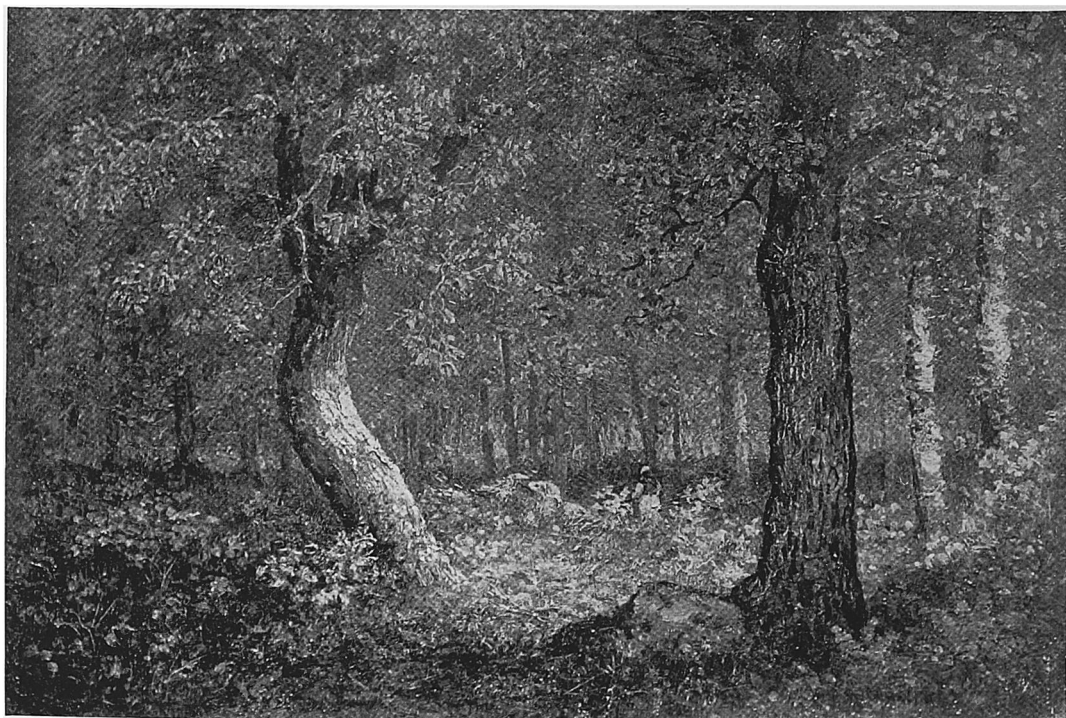
ing his study on sentiment and not on fact. Inness commenced as a positivist, his painting somewhat stiff and hard, but having become a master in this direction, he acquired his mysterious manner as the years went on. Blakelock never was positive, although his earliest pictures slightly resemble the then prevalent Hudson River school, which was rather matter-of-fact. As he was erratic in thought and purpose and his methods absolutely unacademical, a statement about his technique is not only allowable, but indispensable.

How did he secure his richness of tone and a certain velvety surface quality? At the time of his most abundant output, many of his paintings recall those of the Barbizon school, both in treatment and composition. Very soon after Blakelock had entered the circle of artists, the Barbizon paintings commenced to find place in America, so that our young artist could see them often. It is not at all wrong to

declare that Blakelock became a follower of that school, though richer in color.

In no case can something come from nothing. In art, there has been a constant development from first to last. At times the growth has been of weeds and not of beautiful blossoms, again the garden bloomed. Going back to the time of Blakelock's youth, some of us can recall the sensation created among art lovers by the advent of the Barbizon painters. Though their art was based on a previous art this group of men touched an original note. The sound of it has continued to vibrate and will continue. Blakelock felt the tingle of this irritant; felt it, and then invented his own style under the stimulus. Blakelock has no imitators, but he also sent out vibrations, which tingle in other artists' nervous systems.

Blakelock was a rapid painter, dashing on his colors in an off-hand manner, but he rarely finished a painting without going



"WOOD INTERIOR"
By Ralph Blakelock

—Courtesy Moulton & Ricketts Galleries



"POOL IN THE WOODS, AUTUMN"

By Ralph Blakelock —Courtesy Walden W. Shaw, Chicago

over it many times and gradually building up its pulpieness and richness. If we find a sketch painted in one sitting we will see Blakelock plainly in it, but repeated paintings always brought depth and quality.

There is much evidence that he painted on white wooden panel or white canvas. This was done with an abundance of paint and it may be that he mixed varnish with his color, or that it was allowed to dry thoroughly and then varnished, so that the second painting sunk into the fresh varnish and was sustained by it. These pictures often stood for a long time and then were again put through this process of painting into fresh varnish. Perhaps he would dot this varnish surface with numberless brilliant spots, it might be a yellow in the sky or brilliant foliage through which the sunlight filtered. The brilliant sky thinly

washed over with transparent crimson lake suggested a sunset, or his green trees dotted with brownish or reddish notes became mellow, all the tricks which a painter of this sort practices made his tender effects. During this process the paint often became heavily loaded and rough. With a very sharp steel scraper, these roughnesses were largely removed which produced an effect of old ivory. His blue skies, or white skies, attained their richness by repeated scraping and glazing. In order to get light into these skies it was often necessary to paint the surrounding trees very dark, perhaps nearly a rich black. It was one habit with him to go over a light sky with blue, and, when it was dry, to wield the scraper freely, leaving the blue to show from every little crevice all over the sky, which, of course, made it immensely sparkling. As these goings-over were with pure transparent paint (and varnish), the brilliancy increased and the airiness became real. Naturally, correct forms were many times neglected. Blakelock did not worship facts but he did worship color. The

number of painters who paint truth is very small. Almost everybody is something of an idealist.

If you will go into the fields of a summer's day, and lie on your back to gaze into the blue heavens, you will note how deep in tone the sky is, how it has no surface, how it trembles, and how exceedingly refined the blue color is. It is all blue, and there are none of Blakelock's dark streaks or scratches in it, but it trembles and it is mysterious. Blakelock took the bull by the horns; his sky must be mysterious and must vibrate at whatever sacrifice. A real blue sky is difficult to manage and is rarely pleasing. Our erratic artist threw away everything but the velvety depth and the shimmer, and these are what made his art. Of course the world generally counts a blue sky as blue and might refuse to accept

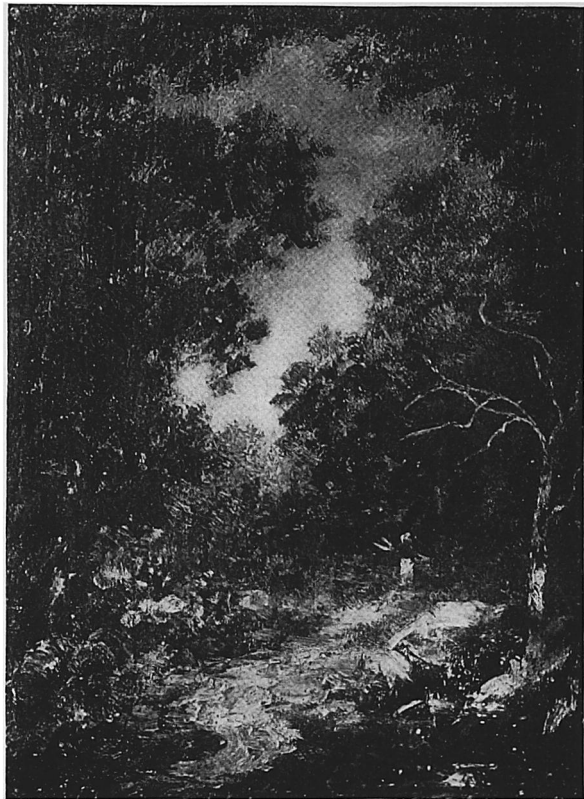
these curious spottings and scrapings. But Blakelock insisted on poetry.

It was told me, about the year 1883, whether correctly or not I cannot say, that Blakelock earned a part of his living by making excellent imitations of Spanish leather, the kind known as *Cuir de Cordoue*, for a noted art house in New York City. They needed these imitations because the original leathers had become exceedingly scarce, as very little of the work has been done since the early part of the seventeenth century. Having cut out the largest possible rectangle from a well tanned goat or sheep skin, the leather is stretched on a light frame and kept perfectly flat. The first process that interests us is the laying of a thin film of shining metal; probably silver foil. A pattern having been transferred to this gleaming ground—maybe a pattern of fruits, vines, or human figures—the forms are painted with rich color mixed with varnish. This being allowed to dry, the varnish and the color go on again, until there is a curious depth to the color and a soft luminosity permeating the entire scheme. We cannot be quite sure how the original leathers looked, although there are many examples still lining the homes of wealthy people who lived two or three centuries ago.

Of course these old Cordova leathers are time-stained, reasonably dirty and richly toned; the effect superb. In many cases the paint has left the surface, revealing the ancient leather, and many times the exterior has been rubbed off, and the interior buff velvetiness mingles with the other vague colors. It must be plain to every one that the process here described is identical with Blakelock's manner of painting. Of course there are no bright skies in the leather but the same principle may maintain with Blakelock's sky, as with the rest of the surface. It certainly looks as if he discovered here his method. In

these leathers we do not spend our time trying to trace out the design, because the coloring is so interesting. It remains without dispute that logic and correct drawing by no means constitute the great attractiveness of many pictures.

Blakelock's manner of procedure is somewhat illustrated by a pair of three-foot-high canvases, in the Moulton & Ricketts collection, one of them evidently painted directly from Nature, and from it the other in the studio. Under overhanging trees lies a mass of granite ledge, cracked by the frosts of winter, and in the midst a cavity containing water; the source of a rivulet. The trees open up to a vista where are spots of autumnal foliage and, over this, a pale sky. This sky was painted with a full brush and then scraped down. The entire presentation is unusually literal for this artist, and most of the color is a ten-



"WOOD INTERIOR"

By Ralph Blakelock —Courtesy S. C. Scotten, Chicago

der gray. The duplicate picture has the same rocks and spring of water, and the vista opening out in the same manner, but to a broken blue sky. The color in the repetition is far richer than in the first one. The greenish trees have many dabs of bright red, although they are still summer trees, but these dabs of color serve to carry the scheme of color throughout the picture. There is reason to suppose that in the course of time he might have worked the second one of these two pictures much more, thereby injuring the sparkle and sprightliness, in trying to gain richness. Still further illustrating the artist, is a quite small panel, with the same motive, still more idealized. The little picture is pure fancy based on the motive, and now we see our man plainly. He really is himself when he idealizes everything, as if the brilliancy and light and color were the only purpose in view. Naturally he departs a good deal from the original, painted out-of-doors, but gains an artistic effect.

Every artist knows that something in nature must be sacrificed for the attainment of a specific result, but not many are as reckless as this man shows himself. Many of the pictures in this collection are quite small, from six inches up to fifteen, and many were evidently dashed in at once, while others have gone through the glazing and scraping process. It is quite wonderful how spirited all of them are, the most complete is not overworked, and those not worked at all are, of course, sprightly. There is a very small moonlight—nothing but a confusion of woods and such objects as might catch moonlight—and a cool night sky full of flecks of cloud. Though so little specific in its drawing, I scarcely know a picture, in my experience, which better expresses moonlight. In fact, it is very fascinating. Some of the simple laws of color are learned by every artist; for example, brown is composed of black and red, if there is more black it is cold, if more red, it is a warm brown. Of course, blue

and steel color are cold. In looking at hundreds of pictures it will be found that they are based on simple contrast of brown and blue. But the manner of getting these together, and securing a successful result, cannot be taught; it comes of the color sense. Of course there may be variations here of green and yellow but both these are cold and crude. The yellow wants its proper amount of red and the green its proper amount of red which removes crudeness and gives harmony; and this is theory; in practice, there needs to be genius mixed in it.

In his early work this man, in a measure, imitated the old Hudson River school, but painted not from the point of view of leaves on the tree and wonderfully drawn branches, a blue sky and a green field, but entirely from the view of rich tone and color. Some of these early pictures are pretty literal, but they kill the work of other men of the period because of their wonderful ripeness of color.

The feeling which led up to his latter noble work, is seen in a canvas of considerable size, formerly of this collection, but now in the new art gallery at Muskegon, Michigan. It is a very warm brownish-yellow slope in front, on which are standing numberless thin trees, not very large, and this whole foreground is yellowish, chocolate and copper-toned. So your eye follows this slope down into a very deep valley, from which rises a mountain top of the strangest bluish-green that you can imagine, and gleaming over it, and through these trees, a lovely warm-white sky. But this warm-white and this bluish-green, and the chocolate front are such extraordinary color, as to stir one's sentiment profoundly.

It is certainly a matter for sincere rejoicing that Blakelock's art has found so many admirers, and more of them than he ever knew, in his painting days. It commands high prices, in the same class with Inness and Wyant: